

Surveillance and Self-Erasure in Sylvia Plath's *The Applicant*

Sylvia Plath's *The Applicant* stages its argument as an interrogation. The poem unfolds through commands, questions, and evaluations that resemble a bureaucratic screening process rather than a conversation. From the opening lines, the speaker assumes authority and treats the applicant as a subject to be assessed, corrected, and ultimately reshaped. Identity in this poem does not emerge naturally. It gets assembled, tested, and approved. This essay argues that *The Applicant* exposes how systems of surveillance erase individuality by reducing human identity to function, compliance, and usefulness.

The poem's structure immediately establishes imbalance. One voice dominates. The other barely exists. The applicant never speaks in full sentences or self-defined terms. Instead, identity appears through fragments, interruptions, and external judgments. The speaker controls the pace and direction of the exchange. Questions come loaded with assumptions. Instructions replace dialogue. Surveillance operates through language itself. The poem shows how constant evaluation reshapes how a person is allowed to exist.

Plath's use of institutional language plays a central role in this process. The speaker sounds official, confident, and procedural. Words associated with inspection and assessment appear repeatedly. The applicant becomes an object under review rather than a thinking subject. This language strips away complexity. Emotional depth disappears. The poem presents a world where value depends on meeting requirements rather than expressing selfhood. Surveillance becomes routine rather than dramatic, which makes it more disturbing.

Repetition reinforces this loss of agency. Certain phrases return with mechanical consistency, creating the sense of a script rather than spontaneous speech. These repeated words simulate standardized procedures. They signal that the applicant's experience is not unique. Anyone could stand in this position. Identity collapses into category. The poem uses repetition to show how systems normalize control by making it sound ordinary.

The role of the body within the poem further emphasizes self-erasure. The speaker refers to physical parts as replaceable components. Limbs, surfaces, and functions receive attention, yet inner life remains absent. The applicant's body appears as something to be fixed, completed, or accessorized. This treatment reflects a worldview where human value resides in utility. Surveillance focuses on visible traits and ignores interior experience. The poem makes that imbalance explicit.

Marriage becomes a key site of control within this framework. The speaker presents it as a solution, a product, and a requirement all at once. Choice disappears. The applicant receives a ready-made answer rather than an opportunity to decide. The poem exposes how social expectations enforce conformity under the guise of fulfillment. Surveillance here extends beyond institutions into personal life. Private identity becomes subject to public approval.

Tone plays a critical role in sustaining the poem's tension. The speaker sounds upbeat, efficient, and reassuring. This tone clashes with the content of what is being demanded. Cheerfulness masks coercion. The poem reveals how control often arrives wrapped in pleasant language. Commands sound helpful. Restrictions sound reasonable. This tonal strategy heightens unease because it mirrors real-world systems that rely on compliance rather than force.

The applicant's silence becomes one of the poem's most powerful elements. Silence here does not indicate peace or agreement. It signals erasure. Without a voice, the applicant exists only as described by others. The poem demonstrates how surveillance silences by speaking for its subjects. Identity gets narrated into existence by authority. The self no longer defines itself.

Plath also plays with the idea of repair and completion. The speaker repeatedly suggests that something is missing or broken. This framing justifies intervention. Surveillance depends on identifying flaws. The poem shows how labeling someone incomplete creates permission to control them. Self-erasure follows when external definitions replace internal ones. The applicant's value becomes conditional.

The ending refuses comfort. Approval does not feel like victory. The process completes itself, yet nothing human feels restored. The poem closes with the sense that identity has been finalized without consent. Surveillance succeeds. Selfhood dissolves. Plath leaves the reader unsettled by how smoothly the process unfolds.

The Applicant remains powerful because it dramatizes control through ordinary language and familiar structures. Surveillance operates quietly, efficiently, and convincingly. The poem warns that self-erasure rarely announces itself as violence. It arrives as procedure, expectation, and approval. Plath's poem forces readers to recognize how easily identity can disappear when systems speak louder than the self.